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SUBJECT: LOW-KEY MEDIA COVERAGE OF IRAN-ARMENIA PIPELINE CEREMONY

REF: YEREVAN 328 AND PREVIOUS

¶1. The March 20 Iran-Armenia pipeline inauguration ceremony, led by Presidents Kocharian and Ahmadinejad, offered surprisingly little fodder for Armenian media. The ceremony was short. The two presidents did not deliver their prepared remarks, apparently because of bad weather at the outdoor site. (Rain and fog had delayed Ahmadinejad's arrival by several hours.) No transcripts have been released of the presidents' remarks, nor have the undelivered prepared speeches been released publicly in Armenia. As of close of business March 20, neither the presidency nor MFA websites have posted any mention of the visit, or of Iran issues.

¶2. The brief outdoor ceremony featured the lighting of a symbolic torch, and then the two leaders retreated indoors to the nearby customs house for an hour-long meeting, first with delegations present and then one-on-one. The two then held a very brief press availability. The press conference consisted of just two questions; Armenian and Iranian public television were permitted to pose one question each, to the irritation of the assembled Armenian press corps. Ahmadinejad then promptly headed home with his delegation.

¶3. Energy Ministry contacts confirmed that the two energy ministers signed an agreement formalizing a previously-initialed plan to build a pair of hydro-electric power plants on the Arax River, one on the Armenian side and the other on the Iranian side. The hydro plants are to be financed by Iran, which will be repaid in electricity.

¶4. The few comments quoted in local media were mostly empty, feel-good rhetoric. The exception was an oblique remark President Kocharian made that the two "friendly countries" had each agreed to do nothing that the other one would regard as threatening to its security. This comment was difficult to find mentioned in print sources, though it aired in television coverage. Kocharian also noted that Armenians remember the goodwill the Iranian people and authorities have showed it during its 15 years of independent history, drawing a contrast with Soviet-Iranian relations which were "connected only by barbed wire." Kocharian noted that 600,000 tons of cargo had crossed the Iranian-Armenian border last year. The two presidents spoke in very general terms about cooperation in various spheres including energy, water, infrastructure, communications, and trade. President Ahmadinejad remarked that the bilateral projects between the two countries were investments in regional stability and security.

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